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RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 0688  
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RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 7779  
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 5339  
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RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 3382  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC  
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RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC  
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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 001103

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STATE FOR EAP AND IO; PACOM FOR FPA

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [BM](#)

SUBJECT: BURMA: THE KNU,S RELUCTANT FIST

REF: A. RANGOON 1070

[1](#)B. CHIANG MAI 175

Classified By: Pol Officer Sean O'Neill for Reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

[1](#)1. (S) Summary. KNU leaders said they believe tripartite dialogue offers the only path to real change, but they still have no faith in the regime to engage in genuine discussions.

The KNU chairman said he would continue to work with other ethnic groups to apply political pressure on the government to negotiate, and hoped the international community would continue to as well. According to the KNLA, September's pro-democracy protests did not result in any significant Burmese Army defections or large numbers of refugees fleeing the country via Karen State. The KNLA's commanding general said the Burmese Army had renewed its attacks on Karen villages with the start of the dry season. He described the Burmese Army as ill-equipped and poorly led and lamented the KNLA's inability to mount large-scale military operations against them. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (S) In a November 9 meeting in Mae Sot, Thailand with Chiang Mai Poloff and visiting Embassy Rangoon Poloff, Karen National Union (KNU) Chairman Mon Shaw expressed no faith in the regime's "roadmap to democracy," preferring genuine tripartite dialogue as the only hope for progress. Mon Shaw said the KNU had been working with other ethnic groups, such as the Chiang Mai-based Ethnic Nationalities Council, to apply political pressure on the regime to negotiate, but added that the KNU's armed wing lacked the strength to back this process up with offensive, unilateral military action. He hoped the international community would continue to pressure the regime to engage in meaningful dialogue, acknowledging the government's response had not been encouraging so far. If the regime agreed to genuine dialogue, Mon Shaw said the KNU would insist on their own delegate, or at least one chosen with the consensus of the other ethnic groups, rather than accepting Aung San Suu Kyi as their representative.

[1](#)3. (S) KNLA Intelligence Chief Issac Po and Commanding General Saw Mutu Sae Poe told us the recent pro-democracy demonstrations and subsequent crackdown in central Burma had no effect on the Burmese Army's posture or operations in

Karen State. They said that they have not received any first-hand reports of Burmese officers defecting since the crackdown and noted no increase in the normal number of enlisted men deserting their posts. They similarly reported no significant increase in the number of civilians fleeing Burma via Karen State since the crackdown, although they had heard a number of pro-democracy activists had joined Karen refugees in fleeing the country in recent months.

14. (S) Issac Po reported the start of the dry season has brought with it renewed attacks by the army, particularly in northern Karen State where more troops have been sent to assist with road-building and other infrastructure projects. Burmese Army troops frequently attack farms and villages both with infantry and mortar fire, according to Issac Po. He told us farmers in Nyaunglebin District have been unable to harvest their crops as a result of these attacks and reported several villages have been shelled in Papun district with a number of civilians killed as a result. Both Issac Po and Saw Mutu Sae Poe confirmed the KNLA had participated in an attack on a small Burmese Army outpost in Kawkareik on October 28 in retaliation for the army's offensive (reftels A and B), but described their military capabilities as primarily defensive due to a lack of soldiers and weapons.

15. (S) In speaking about his experiences fighting the Burmese Army, General Saw Mutu Sao Poe described the regime's soldiers as unmotivated, undisciplined, and poorly led. He said the Burmese Army is under strength and poorly equipped in Karen State. Based on his observations in the field, he reported the average Burmese Army light infantry company now numbers only 30 soldiers rather than the 120 they have on paper. Many of the weapons the KNLA has seized from killed or captured soldiers are in poor repair or simply do not

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work, he said. According to the general, when it does engage the enemy, the KNLA generally ambushes company-sized units of the Burmese Army using three to five man teams. Typically his men attack using small arms and claymore mines and withdraw before their targets can retaliate, he said. He told us the KNLA frequently plans their attacks based on intelligence on troop movements and strength provided by local villagers using handheld radios. Praising his men's bravery in comparison to the Burmese Army, Saw Mutu Sao Poe told us that more often than not, the regime's soldiers run when they encounter the KNLA, despite outnumbering the rebel troops. Nonetheless, Saw Mutu Sao Poe told us the army's scorched-earth tactics and numerical superiority over the KNLA pose a serious and ongoing threat to the Karen people.

16. (S) Comment. Whether out of principle or pragmatism, the KNU appears willing to negotiate and compromise so long as they see the process and genuine and fair. However, Mon Shaw reminded us again that while they respect her, the KNU and other ethnic groups do not see Aung San Suu Kyi as their representative. Neither the KNLA nor the Burmese Army can defeat the other on the battlefield. The KNLA's guns and guts still make them a force the Burmese Army has to reckon with. A sustainable peace will only result from the ethnic minorities joining Aung San Suu Kyi and other pro-democracy activists in a genuine dialogue with the regime. End Comment.

17. (SBU) This cable was drafted in conjunction with and cleared by ConGen Chiang Mai.  
VILLAROSA